

Records Show Doubts on '64 Vietnam Crisis

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

Published: July 14, 2010

WASHINGTON — In an echo of the debates over the discredited intelligence that helped make the case for the war in Iraq, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday released more than 1,100 pages of previously classified [Vietnam](#)-era transcripts that show senators of the time sharply questioning whether they had been deceived by the White House and the Pentagon over the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident.

Related

Times Topic: [Vietnam War](#)

“If this country has been misled, if this committee, this Congress, has been misled by pretext into a war in which thousands of young men have died, and many more thousands have been crippled for life, and out of which their country has lost prestige, moral position in the world, the consequences are very great,” Senator [Albert Gore Sr.](#) of Tennessee, the father of the future vice president, said in March 1968 in a closed session of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The documents are Volume 20 in a regular series of releases of historical transcripts from the committee, which conducted most of its business in executive session during the 1960s, before the Senate required committee meetings to be public. The documents were edited by Donald Ritchie, the Senate historian, and cover 1968, when members of the committee were anguished over Vietnam and in a deteriorating relationship with the Johnson White House over the war.

Historians said the transcripts, which are filled with venting by the senators about the Johnson administration and frustrations over their own ineffectiveness, added little new to the historical record. Even at the time, there was [widespread skepticism about the Gulf of Tonkin incident](#), in which the North Vietnamese were said to have attacked American destroyers on Aug. 4, 1964, two days after an earlier clash.

President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) cited the attacks to persuade Congress to authorize broad military action in Vietnam, but historians in recent years have concluded that the Aug. 4 attack never happened.

Still, the transcripts show the outrage the senators were expressing behind closed doors. “In a democracy you cannot expect the people, whose sons are being killed and who will be killed, to exercise their judgment if the truth is concealed from them,” [Senator Frank Church](#), Democrat of Idaho, said in an executive session in February 1968.

But the senators also worried that releasing a committee staff investigation that raised doubts about the Tonkin incident would only inflame the country more. As [Senator Mike Mansfield](#), Democrat of Montana, put it, “You will give people who are not interested in facts a chance to exploit them and to magnify them out of all proportion.”

At another point, the committee’s chairman, Senator William Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas, raised concerns that if the senators did not take a stand on the war, “We are just a useless appendix on the governmental structure.”

The current chairman of the committee, Senator [John Kerry](#), Democrat of Massachusetts, said Wednesday in an interview that the transcripts were especially revealing to him. In February 1968, when some of the most intense debates of the committee were occurring, Mr. Kerry was on a ship headed for Vietnam.

The release of documents, he said, “shows these guys wrestling with the complexity of it when our generation was living it out in a very personal way.”

COMMENTS

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

This Fall

Today's Headlines Daily E-Mail



Sign up for a roundup of the day's top stories, sent every morning.

Sign Up

[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

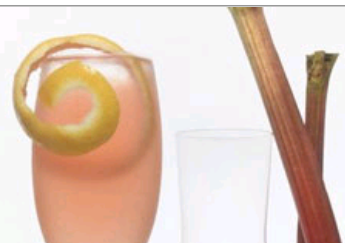
Advertise on NYTimes.com

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED | VIEWED

1. [Aging Gracefully, the French Way](#)
2. [Recipes for Health: Spicy Quinoa, Cucumber and Tomato Salad](#)
3. [Even Without iPhone, Verizon Is Gaining on AT&T](#)
4. [Gail Collins: The Bad News Bears](#)
5. [Nicholas D. Kristof: Seduction, Slavery and Sex](#)
6. [A Picture on the Wall? Why Not Do the Whole Wall?](#)
7. [Food : Field Report: A Michigan Teen Farms Her Backyard](#)
8. [Mind: Accepting That Good Parents May Plant Bad Seeds](#)
9. [Op-Ed Contributors: Economics Behaving Badly](#)
10. [Well: Phys Ed: The Men Who Stare at Screens](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



Case Study: Rhubarb syrup

ALSO IN T MAGAZINE »

- [Karl Lagerfeld's shopping fever](#)
- [Connect with T Magazine on Facebook](#)

nytimes.com

T MAGAZINE

ADVERTISEMENTS

Find your dream home with
The New York Times Real Estate



Fan The New York Times on
Facebook

The new issue of T is here

See the news in the making. Watch
TimesCast, a daily news video.

Order a **low-cost**
subscription today.



He continued, “You couldn’t have imagined in that room of the Capitol that policy makers were agonizing over it in that way, and having that gut kind of conversation.”

In the end, however, the senators did not further pursue their doubts. As Mr. Church said in one session that was focused on the staff report into the episode, if the committee came up with proof that an attack never occurred, “we have a case that will discredit the military in the United States, and discredit and quite possibly destroy the president.”

He added that unless the committee had the evidence to substantiate the charges, “The big forces in this country that have most of the influence and run most of the newspapers and are oriented toward the presidency will lose no opportunity to thoroughly discredit this committee.”

Robert J. Hanyok, a retired [National Security Agency](#) historian, said Wednesday in an interview that “there were doubts, but nobody wanted to follow up on the doubts,” perhaps because “they felt they’d gone too far down the road.”

Mr. Hanyok concluded in 2001 that N.S.A. officers had deliberately falsified intercepted communications in the incident to make it look like the attack on Aug. 4, 1964, had occurred, although he said they acted not out of political motives but to cover up earlier errors.

Many historians say that President Johnson might have found reason to escalate military action against North Vietnam even without the Tonkin Gulf crisis, and that he apparently had his own doubts. Historians note that a few days after the supposed attack he told George W. Ball, the under secretary of state, “Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish!”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 16, 2010

An article on Thursday about the release of previously classified Senate transcripts related to the Gulf of Tonkin episode misstated the employment status of Robert J. Hanyok, considered an expert on the incident. He is a retired National Security Agency historian; he does not currently hold that position.

A version of this article appeared in print on July 15, 2010, on page A8 of the New York edition.

Times Reader 2.0: Daily delivery of The Times - straight to your computer. Subscribe for just \$4.62 a week.

COMMENTS

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

Past Coverage

- [BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Taking Down Big Game With a Crusading Pen](#) (July 10, 2009)
- [Robert McNamara, Architect of Futile War, Dies](#) (July 7, 2009)
- [THE NATION; The Complicated Power of the Vote to Nowhere](#) (April 1, 2007)
- [Vietnam War Intelligence 'Deliberately Skewed,' Secret Study Says](#) (December 2, 2005)

Related Searches

* [Vietnam War](#)

[+ Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

* [United States Politics and Government](#)

[+ Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

* [History](#)

[+ Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

* [United States Defense and Military Forces](#)

[+ Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

FASHION & STYLE »



U.S. »



OPINION »

**Op-Ed:
Economics
Behaving Badly**
The limits of what psychology can tell us about choices.

FASHION & STYLE »



OPINION »



ART & DESIGN »

